

**GROTIUS AS AN INTERPRETER OF THE BIBLE,  
PARTICULARLY THE NEW TESTAMENT**

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In the critical apparatus of the most recent and up-to-date edition of the Greek New Testament, the 26th edition of Nestle-Aland, the name of Grotius occurs twice: at Gal. 2:1 and I Thess. 4:6. His conjectures here are striking reminders to us in 1983 of his important critical and exegetical work on the New Testament. These two references are, however, but a faint reflection of the great reputation Grotius enjoys as an exegete of the New Testament. His Annotationes to the New Testament are indeed the most important 17th-century explanation of the New Testament and the only commentary of those times that is still regularly referred to.

Grotius began work on his annotations to the New Testament during his incarceration in the castle of Loevestein (1619-1621), in the hope that they would form a contribution to the polyglot edition of the New Testament that the Leiden professor of Arabic, Thomas Erpenius (1613-1624), was planning to prepare under the title Tabernaculum Domini nostri Jesu Christi. This project was abandoned, however. Later on, especially during his second stay in Paris, Grotius carried on his work on the annotations with great industry. He attached a great deal of importance to this work: from 1638 he devoted so much of his attention, time and energy to this work of scholarship that some people feared that he was neglecting his proper duties as Swedish ambassador.

Grotius' Annotationes in libros Evangeliorum was published in 1641, not in Paris, but by Johannes and Cornelis Blaeu in Amsterdam. A manuscript copy of part of this work is still extant and is in the possession of the Leiden University Library (MS. B.P.L. 114C vol. IV). This copy was not written by Grotius himself but does contain all kinds of additions and corrections, introduced by Grotius himself and written in his own hand, which were also included in the printed edition. The Annotationes in Acta Apostolorum et Epistolas Apostolicas, which he completed after a period of sustained effort, and a third part containing the notes on the Catholic Epistles and the Revelation, could

not be published until after his death (1645), in Paris in 1646 and 1650. During the last years of his life Grotius also prepared annotations to the whole of the Old Testament, which were published in Paris in three parts in 1644.

The significance of Grotius' Annotationes can best be understood by comparing them with the then current ideas on New Testament commentaries. Firstly, 17th-century commentators proceeded on the assumption that the New Testament was primarily meant for 17th-century readers, and not for readers of the first century A.D. Secondly, commentators of the day did not regard the books of the New Testament as a source of information about the thought and life of the early church but rather as evidence to support their own dogmatic-theological views. The aim of 17th-century exegetes was to use the ancient texts to underpin a modern dogmatic system and to counter the dogmatic systems of those of different persuasions. Dogmas defended by a commentator in this way were able to lay claims to being the theological truth. Consequently, 17th-century exegesis was not of a descriptive kind but dogmatic and polemical: its exponents used ancient texts to demonstrate what their contemporaries were to regard as theological truth and untruth. They posited and proved dogmatic theses, disputed those of others, but did not go into the intentions of the texts in respect of their original authors and readers. Commentators did not say: Paul means this or Luke means that, but, for example: This place proves that the secular authorities derive their power from God and that the Anabaptists wrongly repudiate the authority of the government. This kind of unhistorical, dogmatic attitude is to be found in Roman Catholic as well as Lutheran commentaries, and in those of Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants. It was the attitude of all theological exegetes.

The problem of the dogmatic interest and intention with which exegesis was conducted and commentaries written has two aspects: firstly, the interpretations and commentaries that sprung from such exegesis were strongly denominational in character. Explanations of the Bible in the 17th century were strictly Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Remonstrant or Socinian, since they were designed to support and affirm the theologies of the respective schools of thought. In the tradition of each denomination the explanations of all other traditions

were regarded as wrong, often as heretical or even anti-christian, therefore the validity of these interpretations and the usefulness of the commentaries were both subject to severe restrictions. Secondly, within the confessional traditions themselves, the theologies were in a continual state of flux and development: the problems and antitheses of 1620 were different from those of, say, 1650 and 1675. Gomarism, Cocceianism and Voetianism, to mention some of the manifestations of Calvinism, formed separate theologies and therefore required separate Bible commentaries. One result of this is that even within the various traditions the commentaries were very much children of their times: no modern exegete now refers to the commentaries of Arminius, Cocceius or H. Witsius.

Grotius' biblical exegesis does not belong to the tradition of theological exegesis, but the tradition of philological annotation such as had been conducted since the 15th century by Christian Humanists with linguistic and historical interests. The advantage of the annotationes of these authors compared with the theological New Testament commentaries was that the questions they posed were far less determined by denominational interests or tied to a particular point in time. The foundations of the new annotationes tradition were laid by Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406-1457); further developments were due to Erasmus and Beza. In the first half of the 17th century the genre was practised by quite a number of philologists and orientalists, many of them in the Northern Netherlands, but it achieved its culmination in the Annotationes of Grotius. There is more than one answer to the question how this came about:

1. Generally speaking, the annotationes of Grotius' predecessors had a limited purpose, or at least a limited function. Valla wrote his notes in order to point up translation errors or corrupt passages in the Latin Vulgate; Erasmus wrote his to elucidate and justify his new translation of the New Testament; Beza wanted to supersede Erasmus, Drusius to point out the correspondences between the New Testament and Jewish literature; the aim of Daniel Heinsius' Exercitationes sacrae was to criticise the translation and notes of Beza, to illustrate the specific character of the semiticising Greek idiom of the New Testament, and to show the benefits of the exegesis of the Church Fathers in understanding the New Testament. On the other hand there were those like

Peter Kirsten and Louis de Dieu, who compared the Greek New Testament with its ancient Oriental translations with the aim of shedding light on textual transmission and the meaning of certain passages. Each annotator thus had his own purpose in mind, but each annotator was in his own way one-sided in his treatment. Grotius' approach was a felicitous and balanced combination: he is the most versatile of all annotators.

2. One disadvantage of the annotationes genre was that it did not offer a running commentary on the biblical text as a whole, but simply a series of scattered observations: if the annotator had nothing to say, he passed over whole verses or even larger passages. It is precisely this unsystematic approach that distinguishes annotationes from formal commentaries, and the annotators, including Grotius, were always keenly aware of this distinction. Grotius, however, annotated practically all the verses of the New Testament, elucidating so many words that he went a long way in removing the objections to the genre of annotationes. In the intensity with which Grotius' Annotationes deal with the New Testament they come very close to the genre of commentary, and it is of course this intensity that makes his work so useful.

3. In spite of the great wealth of material offered by Grotius, his elucidation is always sober and concise, which also adds to the usefulness of his Annotationes. Not all New Testament interpreters of the time can be exonerated from a certain unnecessary parade of learning and pompous verbosity.

4. What is of course most decisive is the high quality of what Grotius has to offer in his annotations: his choice of really relevant illustrative passages from ancient literature, for example, is especially felicitous. The extent of his reading is impressive, and he puts it to good use with great ease; he draws the most apposite quotations from not only Greek and Latin but also rabbinical and patristic literature with subtlety and discernment. Lastly, Grotius distinguished himself from other 17th-century exegetes by his critical acumen and the independence of his judgment.

There is room here for only a few of Grotius' notes: at Luke 4:8 Grotius observes that Jesus' words "Get thee behind me Satan", as they occur in the standard Greek text and therefore also in the Authorized Version, were a later addition. Grotius points out that the

shorter text, without the quotation above, is attested by the Vulgate, the Syriac translation and biblical quotations in Origen and Ambrose. It was only later that the Greek text was expanded, in order to bring it into line with the parallel Matt. 4:10 and passages like Matt. 16:23 and Mark 8:33. This is an excellent example of his critical judgment, testifying to a sound conception of the textual history of the New Testament. Modern editions omit these words. It is worth mentioning that Grotius was the first to make extensive reference to readings from the Codex Alexandrinus, then just arrived in England, in his Annotationes. These had been passed on to him by Patrick Young, librarian to the King of England. Thus, from an old uncial manuscript, a large number of so-called Egyptian readings, which deviated from the widely known Byzantine readings, were first made available to a wider public. Grotius' text-critical observations and judgments were soon excerpted from his Annotationes and published in the great scholarly edition of the Bible known as the London Polyglot (in vol. VI, London 1657).

In Rom. 14 and I Cor. 8 and 9, Paul uses the word 'weak' in the curious sense of unenlightened people whose religious conscience prevents them as yet from relinquishing certain ritual rules of life. This use of the word 'weak' is unknown in the Greek before Paul, but at Rom. 14:1 Grotius refers to a brilliant parallel in Horace, Sat.I,IX,68-71, where the word 'weak' occurs in the sense of 'scrupulously conscientious' and in a context dealing with strict observance of the Jewish celebration of the Sabbath. Thus Grotius brings Paul's language back from its isolation.

It is of great importance to note that Grotius was the first to draw attention to the close relationship in language, ideas and thought between Hebrews and Philo of Alexandria. At Hebr. 4:12 he even goes so far as to express the assumption that the author of the epistle to the Hebrews had read Philo, a view that was widely held well into the 19th century and still has its adherents today. In all probability, however, it is better to explain the similarities between Hebrews and Philo in terms of the dependence of both of them on a common tradition. Nevertheless Grotius was certainly quite right in pointing out the relationship between the two and was able to show it clearly at several places in the epistle.

Basing himself on considerations which may be described as

belonging to the field of literary historical criticism, Grotius argues that II Peter cannot have been written by Peter the Apostle, but stems from the time of Trajan (98-117 A.D.). Similarly he argues that the Revelation is made up of pieces dating from different periods and that II Thess. was written earlier than I Thess. What is significant here is not so much the content of Grotius' assumptions as his methods. He endeavoured to understand the books of the New Testament as a product of the time when they were written; to this end he tested and revised traditional ideas on their genesis by the application of other known historical data.

Sometimes, however, Grotius' critical faculty is to be found wanting in the Annotationes. One example of this is that he shares with his contemporaries the deeply-rooted inclination to impose harmony upon the contradictions between parallel reports in the Gospels, and between Paul and the Acts of the Apostles. His conjecture of 'four' instead of 'fourteen' in Gal. 2:1 is an example of this: it strives to identify the journey mentioned here with that in Acts 15:2. In spite of such instances, however, Grotius was more successful than any other annotator in elucidating the writings of the New Testament as documents belonging to the time they were written. Moreover he was able to understand them from their original place in history with a method which can justly be regarded as a beginning of literary criticism. However the New Testament is regarded (and the Church will have to regard it differently), it is in any case a collection of ancient writings. Grotius wanted one thing: to restore that status to them. He realised that the church's attempts to interpret the New Testament in modern terms only led to discord. It was his view that the unity of the churches, his great ideal, could only be served by an interpretation of the New Testament in terms of its original meaning in the early church.

It was not the result of ecclesiastical idealism but of the secularisation of scholarship that in the 19th century most theological disciplines, including biblical exegesis, were to become non-denominational subjects. New Testament interpretation became a branch of philology with linguistic, literary and historical aspects. Thus, modern biblical exegesis is a continuation of the tradition of the philological annotationes, and not of the 17th-century theological

commentaries. It may sound paradoxical, but it is a fact that Grotius was prompted by (ecumenical) ecclesiastical interests to advocate a non-ecclesiastical, historical interpretation of the New Testament, both in his ideas and in practice; in this he paved the way for the modern science of exegesis.

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Grotius at the age of 15. Engraving by Jacques de Gheyn, 1599. Delft, Municipal Archives. Grotius wears the neck-chain with the medallion representing Henry IV, which he received on the occasion of his visit to the king of France, in 1598, in the train of a Dutch embassy to Henry IV.



Frederick Henry (1584–1647), son of William of Orange, at the age of 18. Engraving, 16,5 x 13 cm., by Jacob Matham, 1602.

He was one of Grotius' fellow students at Leiden University. Rotterdam, Atlas van Stolk.